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AUTHOR	Rist, Ray C.
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ABSTRACT

This paper represents an ongoing attempt by the author to elucidate, from a three year longitudinal study, the social and cultural milieu of a single, all black, ghetto school. The purpose of this paper is to detail the manner in which the activities and role of principal in this urban black school are affected by positing an "external social forces" model to explain the failure of children to learn. The institutionalized role of "principal" involves acting as "cultural maximizer" for the school. The cultural maximizer is one whose functions include maintaining the level of the culture as it is and contributing certain qualitative features necessary to the continuance of the cultural life. His function is never to alter the culture radically. He may help give more intense expression to features that already exist, but never wants to bring about fundamental change. This statement closely describes the organizational activities of the two different principals who served at the school during this study. The school contains classes ranging from kindergarten through eighth grade, with one special education class. The enrollment of the school fluctuates near the 900 level and the staff consists of 26 teachers, a librarian, two physical education instructors, an assistant principal, and the principal. All teachers, administrators, staff, and pupils are black. (Author/JM)

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Ray C. Rist, PH. D.

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF SOCIOLOGY

PORTLAND STATE UNIVERSITY

PORTLAND, OREGON

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ON THE ROLE OF PRINCIPAL AS 'CULTURAL MAXIMIZER' IN AN URBAN BLACK SCHOOL*

It would be an understatement to note many persons, educators and parents alike, currently question the effectiveness of urban public school systems throughout the nation to educate their students adequately. There has developed a widespread belief the system of public education is itself the major cause for the absence of substantive learning within the classrooms. Calls for innovation and change from an increasingly vocal and growing segment of the population deal, for example, with curriculum, facilities, competent teaching staffs, and a voice for the community in the control and/or supervision of school activities. The presently structured system is claimed to be incapable of adequately performing its designated function.

Perhaps those most unequivocally rejecting the claim that the causal factor in the failure to educate children in the public school system are the teachers and administrators of those same public schools. They contend it is not the school which is to "blame" for the lack of learning in the classrooms; rather, the absence of learning is the result of a complex series of social factors, all of which are seen as outside the

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sphere of influence of the school and yet directly influencing the school learning situation. This paper will seek to detail the manner in which the activities and role of principal in one urban black school are affected by positing an "external social forces" model to explain the failure of children to learn.

The School

The school which served for this study was built in the early part of the 1960's.[1] It contains classes ranging from kindergarten through eighth grade, with one special education class. The enrollment of the school fluctuates near the 900 level and the staff consists of twenty-six teachers, a librarian, two physical education instructors, an assistant principal and the principal. On a part-time basis there are also a nurse, speech therapist, doctor and social worker, all employed by the Board of Education. All teachers, administrators, staff and pupils are black. (The author is white.) The school is situated within a blighted urban district of a large midwestern city. The census district within which the school is located has a 98% black population. Nearly 500 of the 900 pupils (55%) come to the school from families supported by funds from Aid to Dependent Children, a form of public welfare.

The Principal as "Cultural Maximizer"

To apply a concept developed by Henry (1963:31), the institutionalized role of "principal" involves acting as "cultural maximizer" for the school.

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[1] This paper represents an ongoing attempt by the author to elucidate, from a three year longitudinal study, the social and cultural milieu [illegible] all black, ghetto school. The name of the school, the [illegible] addresses, teachers and students are all pseudonyms. Names are provided to indicate that the discussion relates to living persons, not to fictional characters developed by the author.

Henry describes the cultural maximizer as one whose functions

> include organization (i.e., maintaining the level of the culture as it is) and contributing certain qualitative features necessary to the continuance of the cultural life. His function is never to alter the culture radically. He may help give more intense expression to features that already exist, but never wants to bring about fundamental change. (Emphasis added.)

This statement, I believe, closely describes the organizational activities of the two different principals who served at Attucks School during this study (cf. Rist 1970, 1972 a, 1972 b, 1972 c, 1972 d). Both appeared to accept the institution of public education in general and Attucks School in particular as inherently valid and both sought ways to tie people more closely to that institution. They attempted to give broader and more intense expression to the dominant features of the school that were already in operation by sanctioning corporal punishment and its use throughout the school, involving teachers and students in school-wide functions, and attempting to initiate methods to increase the motivation and desire on the part of the students (cf. Rist, 1972 c). All of these role functions became mechanisms to give sanctioned expression to the operation of the school. New forms of expression of the activities of the institution were not sought, but rather continual reliance on the present activities was emphasized.

The principals did not hold as even a serious contention the claim that the public school is a causal factor for the failure of children to learn. In informal conversations and formal interviews alike, the

assumption was frequently verbalized that Attucks School was a valid and viable institution which was faced with a number of nearly insurmountable obstacles and handicaps. Both principals did acknowledge many of the children were receiving what they considered to be a less than adequate education, but the cause for the shortcomings was laid squarely on the shoulders of the students and their families. Such factors as poverty, broken homes, lack of discipline, lack of interest in the school, and ignorance as to the benefits of education were all cited as reasons that they believed the educational processes was hampered at the school. The principals believed the children were so injured by their environment they were basically "unteachable." A major consequence of such pervasive injury to the children was perceived to be the anesthetizing of all motivation on the part of the students. Both men indicated that they felt frustrated in the role as principal for they were dealing with children "who did not want to learn."

As a result of the above position, the two principals seemed to attribute to a variety of external forces or conditions any failure or inability of the school to perform its function adequately. The children were viewed as being in the grips of circumstances so overwhelming that only the "strongest" (smartest) would have any opportunity for future success. When Mr. Miller was asked, "What do you believe will become of these children in life?", he responded:

> Many of these children will go on. Most of them will finish elementary school and most of them, I believe, will start high school. Some will drop out, though. A few will finish and go on to college. What I am trying to say is that I don't think that school is going to make that much

difference. If it does, you won't really be able to say. Some of the boys will be professionals, but not many. Not that much to make any difference. Most will be at the same level of their families now. We are not going to be able to greatly up-grade them, but we hope to make them somewhat above their parents. Now I would say that when this generation reaches adulthood, the percentage of those on relief should decrease and that would be an accomplishment in itself.

Likewise, when Mr. Elder was asked what, if any, was the major difficulty with which he, as principal, had to deal, he stated:

> If we could only change attitudes, we could make strides. That's the one reason for the kind of programs that we have here. We're trying to get the kids to come and have fun when they come to school. School shouldn't have to be all work. There should be things that children enjoy also. We want to try and get the kids involved in whatever it is that's going on in the school, whether as an audience or at a sock hop or a sing-along or when they put on a play or even at a volleyball game. We want to make enough opportunities so that we can tell a child if he doesn't fit in one slot, maybe he could fit in another. If we can't change the attitudes of these children, we are going to be teaching a blank wall. We will be teaching at them instead of to them. But if we could start to change children's attitudes, you know, the real bright spot is that it may begin to rub off on the parents.

These statements indicate a similarity in perception: the children lacked motivation and a "proper" attitude, therefore the best the school could do would be to instigate programs geared for appropriate doses of "motivational increase." The inherent structure and quality of education in the school was never brought into question.

Both principals sought to give expression to their beliefs related to the needs of the children through the establishment and implementation of a number of programs. The following section will concentrate only on those programs initiated by Mr. Elder for they were more broad in scope, though of the same type organized by Mr. Miller. It is not to be assumed the principals approached the lack of student motivation in different ways but only with different intensity. Both principals did accept the role of "motivation engineer" as part of their responsibility.

"Self Actualization--Our Goal"

During the 1969-1970 school year, a large banner hung from the ceiling of the Attucks School lobby with the words "Self Actualization--Our Goal." This phrase served as the slogan for the motivational program initiated by the new principal, Mr. Elder. He indicated the task of attitude change and motivational increase to be one of his major endeavors of the school year. Teachers were asked to begin a program of utilizing the bulletin boards in the halls as space for messages to the children urging hard work, study, and attendance at school. As indication of the subject content of various bulletin boards throughout the school, the following short descriptions are offered:

1) Two signs together, first shows two black children very poorly dressed and at bottom--"Who Am I?"; second sign shows same two children very nicely dressed carrying signs saying "I Am Somebody--I am courteous, ambitious, honest, neat, respectful and studious." (Both signs in front display case as enter building.)

2) Third sign in front display case--black male and white blond female in academic gowns looking up at a cloud. On cloud are color T.V., car, boat, pot of gold, ranch style house and large stack of cash. Letters at top say "Can you climb this ladder?" Ladder between two persons and cloud spells "Education." At bottom of chart are words, "This school can help."

3) Red letters on black background--"We Gave to America." Picture of Martin Luther King.

4) Yellow letters at top of board--"You can make it if you try!" Pictures of white males modeling clothes--appears to be cut-out from Sears Catalogue. All white males are blond, clean shaven and have short hair and blue eyes.

5) "I am Thankful for the Privilege to Learn"--two white blond children kneeling in prayer.

6) Charlie Brown and Lucy cartoon--first frame, both are standing outside a school. Charlie Brown states, "I hate school." Second frame--Lucy responds, "Good grief, Charlie Brown, school is what you make it."

Third frame--Lucy says, "Why if you are neat, clean, and polite and if you study hard in class and play hard at recess, school can be great." Fourth frame--Charlie Brown responds, "Maybe she is right, maybe it is up to me."

7) Two blond white witches stirring a pot. The first pot is labeled "study" and the second "hard work." Underneath the pots is the caption "The right formula for success."

8) Indian on his knees making smoke signals. Below fire are words, "Heap good rules." On each puff of smoke is a rule. The first says, "Always walk in the halls." The second, "Be kind to other children." On the third, "Wait quietly at the fountains," and on the fourth, "Play safely on the playground."

9) Red letters at the top state "You Can" and at the bottom of the board continue "Start Now." In the middle of the board is an article taken from Ebony detailing the life of a black man in Texas who has been making cowboy boots for over forty years.

Though I am unable to document what effect the use of slogans on the bulletin boards in the halls had on the students, I would surmise the impact was neutral at very best and negative at worst: neutral in the sense that the children may simply, from their point of view, have ignored the boards and the predominance of "moralisms" and "whiteness" in the and negative in that there was a total incongruity between the

life and experiences of the children and that which was depicted for them to see and read. The presence of blacks on the boards was in only two categories; a black martyr shot by a white man or else a black man in a working-class occupation. The emphasis upon internalization of strong work and study habits was presented as the means to future success in the form of cars, televisions, money, suburban homes and recreational equipment. However, all of these rewards for self-discipline in academic matters were shown in the possession of whites.

A second method used by the principal in his attempt to increase motivation was the implementation of a "Careers Program" for students in the sixth, seventh and eighth grades. He stated the purpose of the program was to bring to the school each Friday afternoon someone to speak to the students on careers that would be open to them if they would stay in school. Mr. Elder noted the students "often had no idea" of the benefits that could come if they would finish schooling and graduate. He also noted most of the persons students "looked up to were on the street" and contact with those who were "not on the street" would help change the students' conceptions of what they should desire as a career. The program was initiated in late November of 1969 and the principal arranged for two Friday sessions before the Christmas vacation. On the Friday before the Thanksgiving recess, the guest speaker was a black woman who was a concert pianist. Two weeks later, during the early part of December, the guests were members of the marching band from a nearby Air Force station.

Motivation and Achievement--with the Parents

Both the teachers and the two principals at Attucks School repeatedly verbalized that they believed the nexus of the difficulty in teaching children in the school lay with the families. It was in the family setting, both prior to and concurrent with the school experience, that poverty, parental apathy, lack of interest in school, lack of concern with the children, and inability to perceive the benefits of education were claimed to contribute to the unmotivated and uninterested student in the classroom. It was within this context Mr. Elder spoke of his hope for the motivational program at school having the effect of "rubbing off" on the parents. He assumed if the school could in some manner increase the interest and motivation of the parents in the home, the child would more likely succeed in the classroom.

Within the public school system, and Attucks School in particular, the major means of facilitating communication between the home and the school was through the Parent-Teachers Association. During the observations made at Parent-Teacher meetings, there was witnessed on a number of occasions discussions of why parents were "failing in their duty" to their children by not encouraging achievement in the school. Like their children, the parents were also subjected to doses of "motivational engineering." The following are edited excerpts from Parent-Teacher Association meetings:

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As soon as the entertainment ended, the principal came onto the stage and indicated that he wished to make a few remarks. As soon as he appeared, there was a mass migration out of the gym. Possibly 200 people simply got up and walked out. The principal then spent nearly fifteen minutes discussing the Preparedness and Readiness Test which each student must pass in order to graduate from high school. The principal constantly put the emphasis upon the fact that no matter if the student failed the test in the eighth grade, he could repeat again in the ninth and so on. He told the parents that it was their duty to get their children in off the streets and help them to study. He noted that many high school seniors could not pass the exam and appeared to lay the blame for their failure with the parents. He noted that schools did all they could, and if the child failed, it was the fault of the parents.

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The principal began speaking to the parents in very strong terms about what he perceived to be a lack of control in the school and the difficulty that teachers were having in controlling the children. He stated that some substitute teachers had left in the middle of the day because the children would not obey. He commented

> that the children do not come to school on time. He stated, "Our children have no regard for time." He said one boy in the fourth grade is late every day and he has "both a mother and a father." Good school habits, he noted, would carry over to high school and then to a job. He made no mention of further education.

The ostensible purpose of the Parent-Teacher Association was to provide a forum whereby the teachers and parents could together discuss the issues and concerns of education for the children involved. Thus, if the program were to succeed, there would have had to be a degree of cooperation and trust between the parents and the teachers. The evidence of numerous observations indicates the teachers (and the principals) were unwilling to have the parents involved beyond that of a mere periphery "interest group." There was no instance in which either principal or teachers openly welcomed the parents to visit the school during the day to observe or discuss the educational activities of the children.

One evening, when the parents were in the room of the second grade teacher, several parents asked whether they would be allowed to attend the Thanksgiving program the following week. Mrs. Benson indicated the children were putting on the program, but it was "primarily for the children in the rest of the school." She did state, though, they could come if they wished, yet the latent message in her tone of voice indicated hesitation. This same evening the following short exchange occurred between a teacher and myself:

> I happened to be walking next to the fourth grade teacher when we entered the corridor and jokingly said to her, "And what grade did you come to visit tonight?" She commented, "Do you want to make me say a bad word?" She appeared irritated she had to come. She was extremely unpleasant and appeared bored by the entire proceedings. When she came to her room, the door was locked and a number of parents were standing in the hall waiting for her.

The principal on the night of this particular program had decided at the last minute without informing the parents that the meeting would begin a half hour earlier. Thus when the parents (and myself) began to arrive at approximately seven-thirty, the program for those very few that had come early was nearly over. When I asked the second grade teacher about the time change, she replied, "Well, the principal decided to move it up to seven because he knew that everyone wouldn't show up at seven-thirty anyway."

Maximization as Rationalization

Both principals who served at Attucks School during the course of this three year study agreed the source of their school problems lay outside the school itself. The nexus of the problems was seen as inherent in the social and cultural milieu of the neighborhood surrounding the school, and more fundamentally in the very nature of the family organization itself. Thus, given this perspective, they were able to do little to change the insurmountable conditions and were forced into a defensive posture whereby they would try, according to Mr. Miller, to "save as many

from the streets as possible." This was to be done through the presentation of motivational programs to "change attitudes" and also through presenting programs to stress the benefits which would accrue to one who completed his education. The experience of education as defined by the principals and teachers of Attucks School was deemed as inherently desirable, with the presence of personal idiosyncratic behavior on the part of the students and parents detracting from fuller and more rewarding participation.

The end result of such an ideological position is ultimately the failure to properly educate children. So long as the surrounding environs continue to serve as the scape-goat for the failure of the students, principal and teachers will not have to come to grips with the question of the significance of the school itself in the life of the children. As the Coleman Report (1966) notes:

> One implication stands out above all: That schools bring little influence to bear on a child's achievement that is independent of his background and general social context; and that this very lack of independent effect means that the inequalities imposed on children by their home, neighborhood, and peer environment are carried along to become the inequalities with which they confront adult life at the end of school. For equality of educational opportunity through the schools must imply a strong effect of schools that is independent of the child's immediate social environment, and that strong independent effect is not present in American schools (p. 325).

I would suggest that so long as ghetto school principals such as those described in this study continue their emphasis upon motivational schemes to change attitudes, there will be no significant change in the present inequalities of American public education. To assume the role of cultural maximizer implies a commitment to the status quo of current institutional and cultural practices and values. The principals find themselves in the self-defeating position of defending the current operations of public schools (which are manifestly inequal and discriminatory) while simultaneously claiming to provide programs to eliminate remaining inequalities--but which, in fact, aid in sustaining the very inequalities they decry. Thus the vicious cycle continues: the children do not learn, the causal factors for the lack of learning are placed outside the school, the current institutional operations of the school are not examined, the children do not learn.

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